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Jennifer Luks

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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FOCUS HOPE: A POCKET PARK STUDY, DETROIT, MI

By Jennifer Luks
Department of Landscape Architecture
School of Architecture

Faculty Mentor: Judy Brittenum
Faculty Consultants: Mary Comstock, Mark Boyer
Department of Landscape Architecture

Abstract:

"People do not use city open space just because it is there and because city planners or designers wish they would."

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Urban parks were, and sometimes still are, thought of as sanctuaries from the surrounding city. Large green areas were historically set aside in cities or on the outside of cities to be used as parks, but, until recently, no great effort was made to provide more intimate spaces in individual neighborhoods. In the urban environment today, parks may also be perceived as places of potential crime and danger. A park, depending on its location and users, may be a place that is avoided and thought of by nearby residents and passersby as an eyesore rather than an asset. Lewis Mumford said of park design, "It is not by a mere quantitative increase in the present park facilities, but by a comprehensive change in the whole pattern of life that we shall realize the full social function of open spaces."

The location of this study was Detroit, Michigan, a city notoriously plagued by the effects of poverty, high crime rates, overcrowding, and neglect. On July 23, 1967 one of the most devastating civil disturbances occurred in Detroit. At the end of the rioting a few days later, 43 people were dead, thousands were injured and arrested, and \$100 million in property had been destroyed by fire and looting.

After the 1967 Detroit riot, former president Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a committee to investigate the causes of the riots. The committee recommended four areas as the focus of action to improve the daily life struggles endured by people who participated in these riots. The four areas were: employment, education, the welfare system, and housing. Although this report was quite extensive, it was not exhaustive. It did not include one major component of a city, which has unfortunately been overlooked in the design of many of America's cities, and that is the incorporation of open space.

What is a Pocket Park?

Pocket park is the term used to refer to "parks in densely built locations occupying interstitial space between buildings and bounded by sidewalks and walls of existing buildings" (Goldstein p. 12). A pocket park is usually one to three city lots in size and is typically located in a dense urban area. There are three basic locations for pocket parks: corner lots, midblock lots, and through-the-block lots.

Pocket parks have a range of functions and purposes which depend upon their location and their user groups. A pocket park may serve a business district, a community center, or a residential neighborhood. A pocket park may be a place for workers to eat lunch, a play area for children, a backyard in dense residential neighborhoods, or a community garden. A pocket park may consist of hard surfaces, green surfaces, or a combination of both. They may be plazas with trees for shade, gardens, or playgrounds.

The Focus: HOPE Campus

Focus: HOPE is a forty-acre campus located along Oakman Boulevard and Fenkel Avenue between Linwood Avenue and Woodrow Wilson Avenue in Detroit (see figure 1). Highland Park, an independent city surrounded by Detroit, is located east of Focus: HOPE at the terminus of Oakman Boulevard.

Focus: HOPE is located in an industrial zone. Adjacent to Focus: HOPE are low density residential areas. Oakman Boulevard, which passes through the Focus: HOPE area, is designated as public and private open space corridor. The closest primary community retail/service center in the area is in the city of Highland Park, a few blocks east of Focus: HOPE. The Focus: HOPE campus is divided by the John Lodge Freeway, a freeway extension that runs under Oakman Boulevard. There is also an abandoned railway spur that separates parts of Focus: HOPE from each other.

As Focus: HOPE has developed and grown over the years it has started to evolve into what appears and functions much like

a university or college campus. Focus: HOPE has many of the same features of a campus: teaching facilities, administrative offices, employment areas, and in the near future, residential units. In the years to come, Focus: HOPE will continue to grow and expand. This expansion can continue the way it has in the past, with various buildings and vacant lots being purchased as they become available, however, it is clear at this time that Focus: HOPE would benefit tremendously if the area they currently occupy in Detroit were to be treated as a campus, the Focus: HOPE campus. This would allow Focus: HOPE to be viewed as a whole unit. As a campus, Focus: HOPE would become a community, and the communities around Focus: HOPE would become part of the greater community of Focus: HOPE.

The Focus: HOPE campus currently consists of 20 buildings, several parking lots, and a few vacant lots. If and when buildings and land near Focus: HOPE become available, they can be purchased, and the campus can expand. There are several buildings along Linwood Avenue and Fenkel Avenue that appear as though they may be vacant or in need of renovation. There are also several vacant lots in the area. The purchase and/or reuse of some of these buildings and vacant lots would improve the overall image of the area and allow Focus: HOPE to continue to evolve and expand.

Demographics

The residential areas surrounding Focus: HOPE are predominately African American (98% black and 2% white). The median age of these residential areas is 34. The median household income is \$11,929, and the average household income is \$18,547. The education levels are low; 42% of the population has no high school diploma, 66% have no college education and 85% have no college degree. The unemployment rate is 33%, which is well above the national percentage of 3.9% (based on 1990 census data). The residential areas surrounding Focus: HOPE are comprised of 3,387 housing units. Of the total housing units 10% are vacant, 43% are owner occupied and 47% of the housing units are rental units.

From this data it can be surmised that the residents of this area of Detroit have a lower level of education and; therefore, lower levels of income, and a higher rate of unemployment. The people who live in these residential areas can greatly benefit from an organization such as Focus: HOPE, that provides people with educational as well as employment opportunities.

Another key point to be taken from the demographic data is the predominance of a black population working and living in this area. Just as Focus: HOPE has a story to tell, so do the people of the local African American community.

Creating a Sense of Place

"The power of place...the power of ordinary urban

landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory." (Hayden p.9)

A public park or plaza is shared territory and can help to give a neighborhood, community, or campus a distinguishable and recognizable sense of place. It is important to recognize and embrace the culture and heritage of the people living in a particular area. In order for a park or plaza to have a sense of place the people must feel a connection to that particular park or plaza so that space may become a place rather than merely a space. Places have history and meaning. In order to give identity and meaning to a place, it is important to embrace, reflect and celebrate the history, experiences and culture of the people who occupy a place and of the place itself.

To embrace the heritage of the African-American community one might look at the art of John Biggers and the poetry of Maya Angelou. In the artwork of John Biggers one can see delightful mosaics of geometric patterns, deep solemn colors, the heart and soul of the African-American traditions and culture, and a portrait of the human experience.

Details

As one looks at the details, patterns, and symbols found at Focus: HOPE, they begin to form their own network of geometric patterns. This network of geometric patterns can be assembled into a mosaic similar to those found in the artwork of John Biggers. From the repetition of the diamond shape found in the architectural details of several buildings owned by Focus: HOPE to the symbol of Focus: HOPE (two hands reaching out to each other, one black and one white, enclosed by a circle, a shape without hierarchy), Focus: HOPE contains many geometric shapes, which when put together can make their own mosaic of geometric pattern. The repetition of patterns throughout the Focus: HOPE campus would help to strengthen the identity of Focus: HOPE and aide in creating a sense of place.

Overall Concept: *Reflecting upon the past, celebrating the future.*

Focus: HOPE is a place with a story to tell, a story that needs to be told. The overall concept for the Focus: HOPE campus involves interpreting that story. The story of Focus: HOPE is one of overcoming adversity through a series of events and experiences. Focus: HOPE came out of a very dark period in Detroit's history and gave people hope for a better tomorrow. To understand the importance and value of Focus: HOPE the past must be remembered in order to celebrate the future.

The overall campus plan.

Focus: Hope is currently divided into three zones (see figure2). Zone A is the main zone of activity. This zone contains the administrative offices and educational/training facilities. Zone B is the future residential area, and Zone C is the manufacturing zone. Zone B is separated from Zone A & C by

the John Lodge Freeway, and Zone C is separated from Zone A & B by the Conrail Spur Railroad Line.

The three zones of the Focus: HOPE campus can be linked together by converting the abandoned railroad tracks into a recreational trail. Linking the three zones together with a recreational trail would help to create a unified campus instead of having three separate zones of the campus. A recreational trail would not only link the separate zones of the Focus: HOPE campus together but would help to link Focus: HOPE to other businesses and residents in the area.

There are several opportunities for the abandoned railroad tracks that separate Zone A from Zone B. The tracks could be converted into a recreational trail. This trail would be approximately a one mile loop and could be used for running, bicycling, and walking. Converting the railroad tracks into a recreational trail would link the three zones of Focus: HOPE together, link the communities surrounding Focus: HOPE to the campus, and provide a connection from Focus: HOPE to other parts of Detroit.

The railroad track area presents another opportunity, a potential location for a retention pond, and thus, an additional service and amenity for the site. The overwhelming amounts of impervious surfaces in and around the Focus: HOPE area have few places for rainfall to go. As a result, rainwater has collected in the area between the two sets of railroad tracks. The presence of wetland vegetation tells us that collection of rainwater has occurred in this area for quite some time. This area would benefit from a constructed wetland/retention pond because this type of facility would filter the runoff water that collects after a rainfall. A constructed wetland could become an even greater amenity because it could also be used as an outdoor classroom for nearby students.

At this time Focus: HOPE lacks a defined main entry. The corner of Linwood Avenue and Oakman Boulevard has the potential to become the main entry. There is a parking lot located on each of the two east corners of the intersection. The northeast corner is where the parking lot for the Center for Children is located, and a vacant lot occupies the southeast corner. The purchase of this vacant lot should be one of the priorities of Focus: HOPE. This corner lot could help to give the Focus: HOPE campus a clearly defined entry.

There are several possible options to enhance and create a sense of entry at the intersection of Oakman Boulevard and Linwood Avenue. Pedestrian circulation is one issue that needs to be addressed at Focus: HOPE. Vehicular circulation currently dominates the Focus: HOPE campus. Oakman Boulevard has four lanes of traffic and parking lane on each side of the street. Vehicular circulation also penetrates the Focus: HOPE campus as it leads to various buildings and parking lots within the interior of the campus.

Pedestrian circulation is primarily confined to the sidewalks and street intersections where crosswalks are located. There are no clearly defined pedestrian circulation paths from Oakman Boulevard to the interior buildings at Focus: HOPE.

In addition to the much needed pedestrian routes within the campus there is a need for midblock pedestrian crosswalks at key points along Oakman Boulevard and other areas of Focus: HOPE, such as along Linwood and Fenkel Avenue.

Park A Program Development, Inventory, Analysis

The site of Pocket Park A was once the location of the Saran Company, a paint supplier that went out of business in 1990. Because of the building's condition, it was determined to be unsuitable for use in 1995 and demolished shortly thereafter. The now-vacant lot is enclosed by the Center for Advanced Technologies Annex on the west side, the Food Center on the east side and the F & H Manufacturing building on the north side. The lot is located on the north side of Oakman Boulevard between La Salle Boulevard and Fourteenth Street.

Focus: HOPE has decided that, as soon as funding is made available, this vacant lot will be the location of a pocket park. The lot is across the street from the Resource Center, where the administrative offices of the organization are located. The vacant lot can be seen from the second floor of the Resource Center and is the primary view from the windows on the north side of the building (also the location of the director and co-founder's Eleanor Josaitis' office). A row of evergreen trees was planted along the south side of the lot to help screen the view from the Resource Center and Ms. Josaitis' office. The second view from the park is of the alley behind the Food Center.

The vacant lot is closed off by a chain link fence on the south and east sides of the lot and by rows of barbed wire along the F & H Manufacturing building on the north side of the lot. The lot itself is completely vacant; no debris has been allowed to collect on it. There are three entrances to the park: one from Oakman Boulevard, a second from the alley between the CAT and the Food Center and a third from the Food Center. The lot is flat and contains some remnants of the building that once occupied it.

Pocket Park A is located in one of the three nodes of activity at Focus: HOPE. The overall campus would benefit greatly if this pocket park and the Resource Center were to be linked together so that they are visually one unit. There are three entrances to Park A: along Oakman Boulevard, from the Food Center, and from the alley behind the Food Center. The alley would need to be enhanced if it were to remain open. The alley could be a potentially unsafe area because it is hidden from any views from the street and from any offices or buildings in the area. Closing this alley is one possible solution.

The walls of the buildings that enclose the park have fallen into disrepair. These walls have been painted in the past. The walls can either be painted again or, depending on the condition of the bricks, the paint may be removed. Painting murals on these walls is another viable option.

The design of this park will have to ensure that access to the service corridor along the Center for Advanced Technologies Annex remains clear and open. Topsoil will have to be brought in; the current conditions of the site are not suitable for plant growth. The row of evergreen trees used as a temporary screen along Oakman Boulevard will have to be removed, as will the chain link fences.

Concept: CELEBRATION

The people who come to Focus: HOPE not only need to reflect upon their past, but they also need to celebrate their achievements, heritage and daily lives.

Park A Final Plan

There are three main components of the final design of Park A: a public space, a grove of trees, which create a transition between the public and semi-private space, and a semi-private space (see figure 3). The park begins at Oakman Boulevard, steps up to a grove of trees, ramps down through a more secluded space and terminates at a cafe. The dark, gloomy alley has been replaced by this cafe to ensure a constant flow of activity in the park, provide a safer alternative to the alley, and provide a back door to the park, which can be locked when it is not in use.

As one exits the cafe, a trellis provides some protection from the sun and allows the experience from indoor to outdoor to be a gradual procession. The next space is a more secluded place. Found in this space are several murals painted by local artists and seating areas to view the murals and ornamental displays in the planting beds under the murals. The change in elevation will encourage the pedestrian to slow down, maybe even stop and enjoy the beauty of the artwork on the walls and the vegetation coming from the earth within this park.

The walk from the cafe to the public space is a processional walk. The walkway itself is smaller at the cafe entrance but opens to merge with the public space. A grove of honey locust trees provides a transitional area between the two parts. Movable chairs can be found under the light, delicate canopy of the honey locust. As the trees end, the next space begins. A set of stairs, which is also a large seating area, gradually steps down into the public space at the main entry of the park.

At the edge of the park is an interactive fountain. This fountain may be turned off when Focus: HOPE has the need for a large public gathering space. The top of the set of stairs could then become a stage, and crowds could fill the area of the interactive fountain and spill out onto Oakman Boulevard.

In addition, the service corridor has been kept clear and three feet below the grade of the park, which keeps this area separate from the park. A service corridor has also been provided for the entry to the food center.

Park B Program Development, Inventory, and Analysis

Pocket Park B is located on the corner of Oakman Boulevard and Woodrow Wilson Avenue at the northwest corner. The building adjacent to the vacant lot (on Oakman Boulevard) is the former Communications building of Focus: HOPE. Newsletters and brochures were once published and stored there; this building is currently vacant. The other building, north of the vacant lot, is owned by Taylor Engineering Corp. (on Woodrow Wilson Avenue), not by Focus: HOPE. A chain link fence divides the two properties. Across the street from the pocket park site is the Yellow Pages Building. This building is owned by Focus: HOPE and is currently vacant. The future plans for this building are to renovate it into residential units for participants in Focus: HOPE's programs and hotel rooms for visitors. The building materials consist of red brick, off-white concrete blocks, and light brown brick. A large portion of the Taylor Engineering building is covered with corrugated green fiberglass.

The site itself is mostly gravel with some concrete remnants of the building that once stood here. The site is flat and large puddles of water tend to accumulate on this lot near the intersection. There is one light pole in the center of the vacant lot. This lot is currently being used as a parking lot. There are three vehicular entrances (paved driveways) to the vacant lot. Street trees have recently been planted along Oakman Blvd. in front of the vacant lot. Another feature of this site is the steam tunnel vents that are located along Woodrow Wilson Avenue. There are two vents that are approximately six feet tall and colored blue. Also, there is a utility corridor that traverses east-west along the chain link fence that separates Taylor Engineering's property from Focus: HOPE's property.

Park B, similar to Park A, is located in one of the three main nodes of the Focus: HOPE campus. The overall design of the campus would benefit if the two vacant buildings and the vacant lot visually read as one unit. The Yellow Pages building can be seen from the freeway and from any position on the Focus: HOPE campus. This building is a landmark building, and Focus: HOPE should take advantage of its presence.

The vacant lot can be divided into two main zones: a service/parking zone and a park zone. The park zone should be kept clear of automobiles. Vehicular circulation can and should be kept behind the vacant building. A use for the vacant building next to the park should be determined so the functions of the park and building go together.

The steam tunnel vents located along Woodrow Wilson Ave. cannot be moved. The utility lines, however, can and should be placed underground. Parts of the Taylor Engineering building

will need to be screened (particularly the corrugated green fiberglass). A planting buffer is also needed along the John Lodge Freeway. One view in particular is worth keeping, the view from the street edge towards the Taylor Engineering building. The facade of this section of the building is red brick, which is a pleasant background to the red brick building located in front of it.

Concept: REFLECTION LOOKING BACK LOOKING FORWARD

People who come to Focus: HOPE do so because they want to make their lives better. This park is for those people, to reflect upon their past and look forward toward the future.

Park B Final Plan

The design of Park B consists of a variety of seating areas, intricate paving patterns, trees, planting beds and a water element (see figure 5). Park B is a place of reflection, a "backyard" for the residents of the Tech Villa and other neighboring residents and visitors. The steam tunnel vents remain where they are, and this object has been repeated along both sides of Woodrow Wilson Avenue to visually link both sides of the street and to integrate the steam tunnel vent into the design of the park. The steam that comes from the two working vents is real, but the smoke that comes from the faux steam vents represents the smoke that lingered over the city of Detroit during the summer of 1967. This element will serve as a reminder of the Detroit Riots so this event can be reflected upon.

The fountain contains the symbol of Focus: HOPE. The hands are made of metal coated with a colored sealant. Along the centerline are a series of fountain jets. The water level of the fountain is just below the height of the hands. The outer edge of the fountain is 30" deep; this edge is also a seat wall.

There are thus a variety of seating areas in this park: around the fountain, along the planters and in moveable chairs that can be placed in the sun around the fountain area or under the shade of the honey locust trees. There are also moveable tables. There are two types of planters: one close to the street edge of Oakman Boulevard, with public seating areas, and another along the back edge of the park, a more private seating area. These planters are to be filled with colorful displays of annuals and perennials.

The paving patterns of this park are a manipulation of the diamond shape found on many buildings on the Focus: HOPE campus. The patterns are larger at the more public areas, and the pattern is smaller at the more private areas of the park. This paving pattern has been laid out to fit the dimension of a modular brick with sand swept joints. The diamond shape around the trees allows for the removal or addition of bricks depending on the growth of the trees.

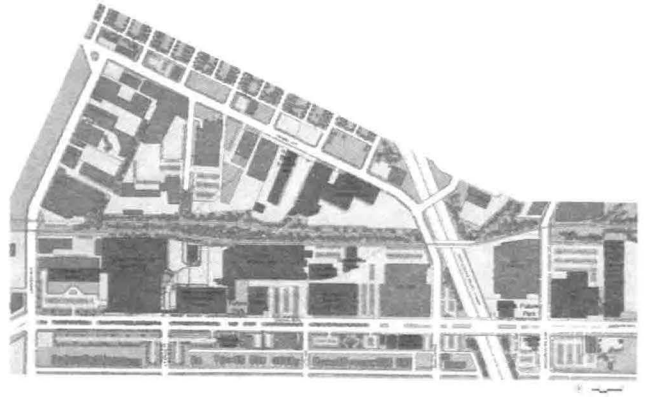


Figure 1: Map of the Focus: HOPE campus

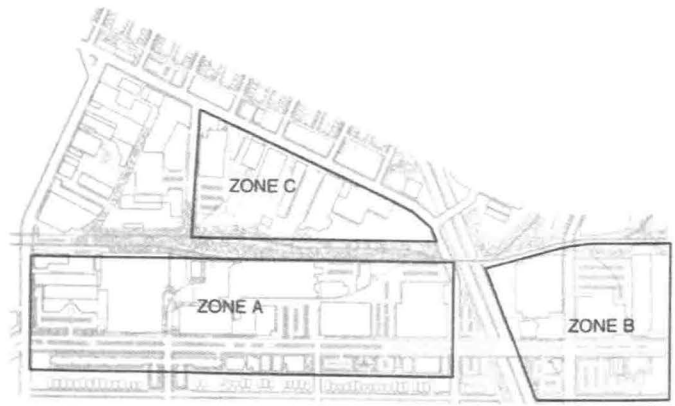


Figure 2: The three zones of the Focus: HOPE campus

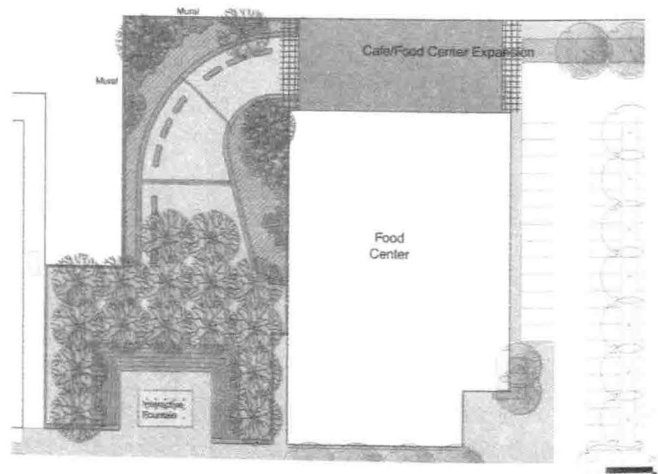


Figure 3: Pocket Park A final plan

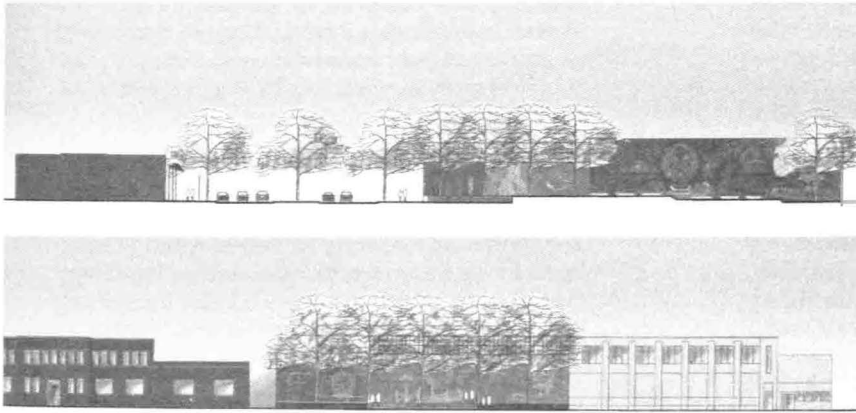


Figure 4: Pocket Park A sections

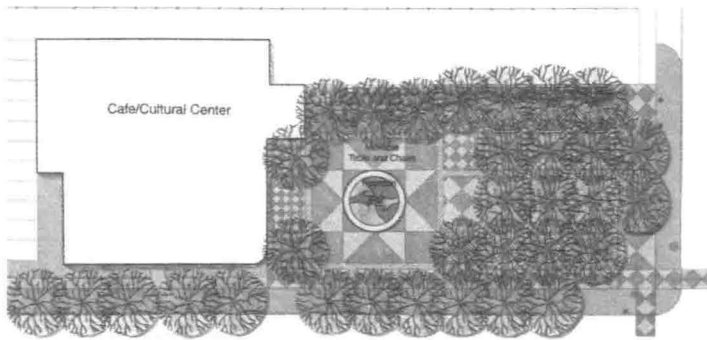


Figure 5: Pocket Park B final plan

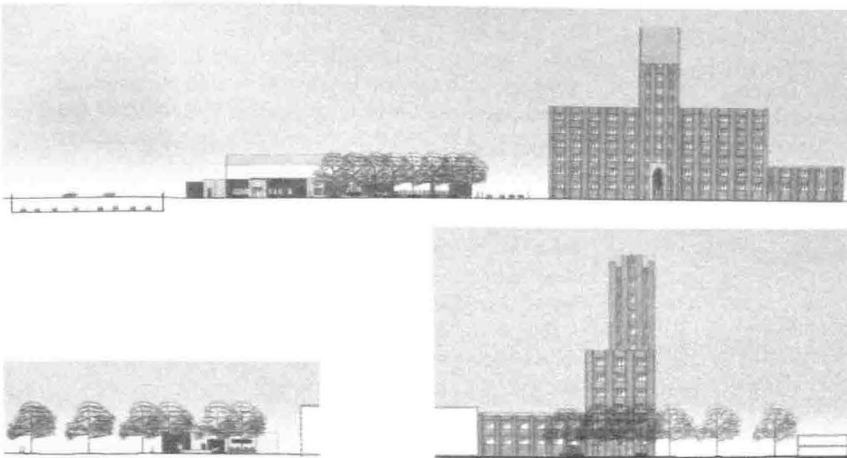


Figure 6: Pocket Park B sections

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Faculty comments

Judy Brittenum, Ms. Luks' primary mentor and critic on her thesis project, described her work as follows:

Jennifer's writing and research ability is among the most outstanding of the students I have mentored for the past three years. She courageously selected a senior demonstration project in Detroit, within a site directly related to the Detroit Race Riots of the sixties. Project Hope, the non-profit institution that brings the prospect of a better life to the millions who suffered during this time, was ready to expand their facilities in the heart of a very poor neighborhood, wanting to design the infill fabric for a contiguous set of unrelated buildings and services. Project Hope approved Jennifer's involvement, and she set forth to design a fairly straightforward project. Little did she know that the site was much larger than she first believed and that the program involved would take most of her design time to develop. Plans would require a far greater expertise and research ability than most landscape architecture thesis projects.

Jennifer had spent several semesters working at the University of Arkansas Community Design Center, learning their approach to process design. She had also held several professional internships, which allowed her entrée to landscape

architecture firms of note. The project she chose would command that she assemble all her knowledge and skills in determining a project solution that was adequate for Project Hope. Jennifer's first undergraduate degree was successfully completed in history, and contrary to common belief, a second degree in landscape architecture provided uncommon challenges to this traditional student.

The level of skill development and problem solving required are special to the architecture discipline, giving a wide berth for new educational roles to even the most seasoned student. Jennifer has completed a demonstration project that encompasses an understanding of ethnic, economic, community and ecclesiastical concerns. The work that she has done is not only a research work of merit but also a public service project worthy of publication and publicity. Her efforts are meritorious and her model for other students far exceeds most. I believe that you will find Jennifer Luks project provocative and stimulating.

Mark Boyer, who shared responsibility for the development of Ms. Luks' project during the final semester of work, is very complimentary as well. He said:

As one of Jennifer Luks' advisors, I was excited and intrigued about her Project Hope project in Detroit, Michigan, and am well-pleased with the end result. Through her work, Jennifer was able to expand the vision of possibilities from simply a plaza in a leftover space between buildings to a series of plazas, which serve not only the client but also the surrounding community.

The thoroughness with which Jennifer researched her site gave rise to a strong and compelling conceptual theme for the project. She drew inspiration from the site and community's history, the client's mission statement, and the cultural fabric to create rich spaces. These spaces provide not only for the intended function, but also for a sense of community ownership, which ensures higher project success. They tell the story of the place and will help keep current and future generations in touch with the rich cultural significance of that place. Jennifer's work has exceeded the expectations of the client and can be held up as an example of design process and success for future students.

Karen Rollet-Crocker also worked extensively with Ms. Luks. She had this to say about her:

Jennifer Luks' senior landscape architecture planning and design study about Project Hope was the result of an extensive planning and design process, which responded to revitalization concerns, educational needs, economic issues, social concerns, and racial issues in the city of Detroit, Michigan. In beginning her work, Jennifer was faced with the kind of overwhelming situation that is typical of poor, isolated

inner city neighborhoods. In this case, the goal of a planner is to translate a broad range of community needs into design recommendations that can galvanize people to move forward step by step, in spite of the odds against them.

Jennifer found that her analysis and recommendations needed to be expanded to the context of the city to study an abandoned railroad line, nearby neighborhoods, and major boulevard access. She also looked at nearby underutilized buildings. It was only then that she could recommend design concepts to improve the streetscape and two outdoor plazas.

There was yet another issue to be resolved in her project, which turned out to be most difficult. This was discovering a visual design concept that related to the specific culture, identity and goals of a training and education center, which served the African American population. This was the topic of a rather heated faculty discussion at her preliminary presentation. She found a way out of the impasse by doing two things: looking at the details which emerged out of a derelict industrial site and discovering the art of the African American artist John Biggers. The result was that she became aware of the impact of African art, religious meaning, and southern farming culture on this inner city site. Her use of these ideas in designing the plazas was one of her proudest accomplishments.

She has taken full advantage of the opportunities that have been available to her at the University of Arkansas. She has spent several semesters at the UACDC, a branch of the School of Architecture, which works on community development projects. The work is very demanding, and students must have skills in graphics, computer use, conceptualization, and writing to succeed. Other learning opportunities included a scholarship to study English landscape style and urban studies with Karen Hanna, our departmental chair.

Her organizational skills have put her in several student leadership positions in our Department of Landscape Architecture, including President of the Student Chapter of the ASLA. In this position she has organized get-togethers for students and visitors to our school. She was the head of a design team working on a special student project for Ed Stone, Jr. who was here as our John Williams Fellow. Jennifer also obtained a position as an intern at the nationally known landscape architecture firm of Johnson, Johnson and Roy in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She was one of just a few students selected for this opportunity from schools across the country.